

### Following the bear: the revival of Plough Monday traditions and the performance of rural identity in the East Anglian fenlands

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## Abstract

In Whittlesey and Ramsey, two market towns in the East Anglian fenlands, farm labourers led a 'Straw Bear' through the streets; one of an array of Plough Monday customs marking the start of the agricultural year. The practice seems to have come to an end in the early 20th century, when it was forbidden by a police inspector as a form of begging. Yet what was had come to be seen as an unruly and unsavoury practice was renovated as a valued form of cultural heritage in 1980, in the wake of the wider folk 'revival' in the United Kingdom. The performance of Straw Bear festivities gives us a vantage point on the cultivation of rural identity in contemporary Britain, allowing us to ask what it means to live in, belong to, and act within a landscape completely transformed by mechanised arable farming. I follow Abner Cohen in attending to the relationship between symbolic potential and political power within the carnivalesque, tracing in particular the way that revived traditions become deployed and read in the context of contemporary 'culture wars'. At the same time, I draw on Turner in his emphasis on the socially generative potential of misrule. In the revived Straw Bear celebrations, we see a striking invention of tradition in the context of changing social and economic norms in rural England. Yet alongside the apparent gentility of revived folk customs, as evening falls, folk musicians and their activities give way to the convergence of young people from the surrounding region for a night of drunken revelry around the town. This paper explores the different facets of this modern midwinter custom: as heritage and as night of joy in the cold of winter; as cultural spectacle and as people throwing up in the streets; as continuation and as invention.

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## Following the Bear

### The revival of Plough Monday traditions and the performance of rural identity in the East Anglian fenlands

Richard D.G. Irvine

#### Marking the New Year

The bear dances, a stomping, spinning mass of straw, as the melodeon squeezes out its tune. People watch with pints of beer in hand. The bear's keeper, wearing a bowler hat and carrying a brass-topped walking cane, stands ready to lead him through the streets; children follow behind, scrabbling to collect the lucky pieces of straw shed in the course of the bear's exertions.

This is a scene from early January in the market town of Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire. The straw bear festival is a modern-day manifestation of the midwinter revelry that once occurred in varied forms throughout the East Anglian fens around the time of 'Plough Monday' – the Monday following the Epiphany,<sup>1</sup> traditionally marking the first day of the new agricultural year. What place does such tradition have in the lives of a population which today appears largely disconnected from the agricultural labour that gave Plough Monday customs their significance? Indeed, given that the event is a resuscitation of practices that had fallen into abeyance, are we then to treat such a revival as an invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and what does it actually mean to do so?

Grounded in ethnographic research in the region from 2011 onwards, this paper explores the social dynamics of the fenland Plough Monday festivities and their revival, focussing in particular on the revival of the Straw Bear in Whittlesey (since 1980) and Ramsey (since 2009). What do they tell us about changing social and economic norms in rural England? From this perspective, the celebrations act as a vantage point from which to understand the cultivation of rural identity in contemporary Britain, allowing us to ask what it means to live in, belong to, and act within an East Anglian Anthropocene landscape completely transformed in the service of mechanised arable farming (Irvine 2017). Following Cohen (1993) in his attention to the relationship between symbolic potential and political power within the carnivalesque, I trace in particular the way that revived traditions become deployed and read in the context of contemporary 'culture wars', for example in commentaries on the role of 'blacking up' in folk dancing associated with the festivities and

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1 The feast of the Epiphany is celebrated on the 6<sup>th</sup> January, and commemorates the visit of the three magi to Christ. It marks the end of the Christmas season.

popular understandings of the effects of political correctness on culture. Yet this does not exhaust our understanding of midwinter celebrations as a space for the inversion of normative ways of being: the paper therefore returns to the classic theme of the interaction between structure and anti-structure (Turner 1969), misrule and its routinisation. Indeed, in Whittlesey we see that in spite of the designs of folk revivalist organisers, who are required to give assurances to authorities about the safe management of the event, the Straw Bear can easily become a space of license and joyful unruliness – generating anew the very characteristics that had led to officials working to shut them down in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

By way of introducing the history of the Straw Bear, the account opens with a critical reading of Frazer (1912), who documented the fenland Plough Monday practices, but in so doing reveals a problematic distinction between the true meaning of the ritual and the apparent ‘ignorance’ of participants. Taking this reflection on Frazer as my starting point, and moving through a documentation of the practices in their revived forms, what I attempt to explore are the very different kinds of festivity which are braided together in the act of ‘following the bear’. Following the bear is a folk revival activity, with its exhibition of social history and ‘traditional’ culture, and attendant concerts. Following the bear is also a premise for midwinter conviviality, partying and a longed for night out. This paper explores the different facets of this modern custom, treating not as dichotomies but as contemporary elements of the Plough Monday phenomenon in dynamic tension: as heritage and as night of joy in the cold of winter; as cultural spectacle and as people throwing up in the streets; as continuation and as invention.

### Origin stories

The present-day celebrations ground themselves in the antiquity of Plough Monday practices: Frampton (1989: 4) points to records of pre-reformation votive offerings for the agricultural year ahead, with the suggestion that Plough Monday dances derived from collecting ‘light money’ for the purpose. While such early records are sporadic, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century we see extensive documentation of fenland ‘ploughboys’ disguising themselves by various means, including blacking up their faces and wearing costumes, then taking a plough through the streets, sometimes dancing, and requesting money (with the threat that they would plough up your front step if money is not forthcoming). They would then spend the day, and the money collected, in revelry.

The emergence of the Straw Bear can be seen in this context of disguise and revelry, as part of a competitive push for ever more outlandish costumes. It appears to have been localised to the market towns of Whittlesey and Ramsey. But there is a lack of clear evidence that it necessarily formed a continu-

ous tradition; the practice of dressing a ploughboy up as a Straw Bear to be led through the streets by his ‘keeper’ may have occurred sporadically rather than year after year (Frampton 1989: 11).

The practice was documented and interpreted by Frazer in *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild*, Part 5 Volume 2 of the third (and most exhaustive) edition of *The Golden Bough*. Considering the Plough Monday festivities more widely, he treats the ploughboys’ activities as an instance of sympathetic magic, suggesting that the object of the actions, mimicking the ploughing of the land (by taking a plough through the streets) and the growth of the plants (by leaping high) is probably to ensure a good crop in the coming year.

*The clue to the meaning of these curious rites is probably furnished by the dances or rather jumps of the men who wore bunches of corn in their hats... the original notion, we may suppose, was that the corn would grow that year just as high as the dancers leaped. If that was so, we need not wonder at the agility displayed on these occasions by the yokels... What stronger incentive could they have to exert themselves than the belief that the higher they leaped into the air the higher would sprout the corn-stalks? (Frazer 1912: 330-331)*

Having rooted the significance of Plough Monday practices in the desire to ensure the fertility of the land, he turns to the Bears themselves, noting their similarity to a wider phenomenon of ‘representations of the corn-spirit conceived in animal shape’ (Frazer 1912: 325). Here he adopts wholesale the view of the 19<sup>th</sup> century folklorist Wilhelm Mannhardt who had extensively catalogued farming rites, believing them to be contemporary survivals of Indo-European concepts of a vegetation spirit, or divinity indwelling in the growing crops, with the intention of ensuring the fertility of the land by way of honouring the divinity.<sup>2</sup>

*If such was the real meaning of the ritual of Plough Monday, we may the more confidently assume that the Straw-bear who makes his appearance at Whittlesey... represents indeed the corn-spirit. What could be more appropriate than for that beneficent being to manifest himself from house to house... after a magical ceremony had been performed to quicken the growth of the corn? (Frazer 1912: 331)*

In his account, Frazer draws on a description provided by G.C. Moore Smith of Sheffield: ‘While I was at Whittlesey (Cambridgeshire) yesterday, (Jan. 12th 1909), I had the pleasure of meeting a “straw-bear,” if not two, in the street. I had not been at Whittlesey on the day for nearly forty years, and

2 See Ackerman (1991: 48) for an account of the significance of Mannhardt to Frazer’s theory, allowing him to claim an ancient basis for the systems of thought expressed in existing customs.

feared the custom had died out' (Moore Smith 1909: 202). This encounter is described as taking place on the day after Plough Monday, with 'Straw-Bear Tuesday' treated a continuation of the previous day's festivities. Moore Smith continues, 'In my boyhood the "straw-bear" was a man completely swathed in straw, led by a string by another, and made to dance in front of people's houses, in return for which money was expected.' We then see from his account that the appreciation of such customs was far from universal, and in particular practices such as the Straw Bear could be an object of suspicion to the authorities.

*I was told that two years ago a zealous inspector of police had forbidden 'straw-bears,' as a form of cadging, and my informant said that he thought that in many places they had been stopped by the police. He also said that at Whittlesey the police had prevented the people on Plough-Monday from taking round the plough, as they always did when I was a boy. It seems a great pity that primitive customs should be suppressed by Bumbledom, and the thought occurred to me that a representation by lovers of folklore, addressed to County Councils, would be a means of preventing such action in future. (Moore Smith 1909: 202)*

Where Moore Smith and Frazer saw ancient ritual significance, some clearly only saw anti-social behaviour; custom as an excuse for begging.

Yet one might argue that both Frazer and the forces of law and order – or 'Bumbledom', as Moore Smith memorably puts it – in their different ways approach the festivities as a *debased* ritual. If the police might have had their suspicions over the motives of the Straw Bear and his handler, Frazer says little to suggest that the 'yokels' sincerely understood the 'true' (that is, the magical) significance of their actions. He does not appear to credit those performing as grasping the purpose of their costumes and dances, but rather sees them as a survival of form whose meaning has been lost. It appears Frazer is only interested in ritual as an aspect of magic towards a particular efficacious end (Quack and Töbelmann 2010: 14). As a result, in pursuing his analysis Frazer moves towards meanings of which the participants would not be conscious, but can only be grasped through the comparative method and the recognition of the rites as primitive survival. He points to related rites throughout Europe, and to sources in classical Greece where the sacrificial animals were treated as embodiments of the corn-spirit, arguing, 'these rites still practised by the peasantry at opposite ends of Europe, no doubt date from an extremely early age in the history of agriculture' (Frazer 1912: 335). Thus neither the ploughboys nor the police who seek to suppress their festivities know what is truly at stake: such a vantage point is only available to the anthropologist. The problem with such an approach, of course, is that in

reaching towards hidden (unconscious) motives, the symbolic elements are given a life of their own at the expense of the social dynamics of the festivities as they actually occurred. Both Frazer and the police seek to subordinate the revelry to laws – albeit somewhat different laws. The end result of both cases is that the celebrations themselves are silenced.

When the practice itself ceased is unclear; the last newspaper account of the Straw Bear comes from 1913 (Frampton 1989: 14), leading to the suggestion that the loss of young men during the Great War and the consequent break in cultural continuity finished off the already beleaguered traditions. Yet this was not a final ending.

### Rattlebones and Ploughjack: the revival at Whittlesey

The revival of the Straw Bear at Whittlesey can be understood in the context of a wider English folk music revival;<sup>3</sup> or more precisely, the ‘second revival’, which took place from the 1950s onwards, gaining traction through the spread of folk clubs and folk festivals. A number of influences intersected to create the conditions for the rebirth. The first was the revival of interest in, and performance of, Molly Dancing (Bradtke 1999), the form of dance associated with the Plough Monday festivities, involving several disguised dancers (traditionally these dancers were men, with one dressed as a woman). The research of the folklorist Russell Wortley, including interviews with those who remembered the dances, led to a public performance of Molly Dancing by the Cambridge Morris Men on Plough Monday in 1977 (Frampton 1989: 19), believed to be the first since in the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time a group from Kent, the ‘Seven Champions’, also began to perform Molly Dances, generating wider interest; many contemporary manifestations of Molly Dancing take their cue from the dances pioneered by the Seven Champions (Bradtke 1999: 8).

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3 The term ‘English folk revival’ does not cover a single discrete period, but rather covers a range of activities from the end of the 19th century onwards. The so-called ‘first revival’, from the end of the 19th century to around 1920 (and thus taking place at a time contemporary to Frazer and Moore Smith’s work of folklore preservation, described above) was led by a number of scholars and collectors who set out to record and preserve traditional English music and dance to be disseminated through publication and teaching in schools (see Boyes [1993] for an account of this period). A later ‘second revival’ in the 1950s and 60s saw the expansion of interest in traditional practices through the spread of folk clubs, giving birth to the career of popular folk performers as well as a widespread familiarity with folk music treated as a particular ‘genre’ (for accounts of this period see Brocken 2003; Bean 2014). It is this second revival which is of most relevance to the rebirth of the Straw Bear.

4 For an account of Molly Dancing from around the time that it was believed to have fallen into abeyance, see Needham and Peck (1933).



A second influence, less obvious but nonetheless crucial, was the rise of folk-rock. The popular consumption of revived 'traditional' music had been driven by the proliferation of folk clubs and folk festivals throughout the 1960s. As Brocken (2003) records, this revival was counter-cultural in focus, drawing on the resources of traditional music as a source from which to critique contemporary culture and loss of identity, seeking an 'authentic' voice of British working-class life which had been displaced by social and economic change. Such idealisation of historic forms and contexts of musical production can generate tensions. As Livingston (1999: 71) has argued with regards to folk music revivals, the 'preservationist' instinct of those idealising folk traditions can be difficult to balance with desires for innovation in performance. The sense of preserving cultural purity pegged to a fixed point in the past sits uneasily with the ideal that what is being performed constitutes a living tradition.

One outcome of these tensions was the emergence of folk-rock as a form of popular music, charting alongside other forms of pop and rock and thus gaining considerable airtime on national television and radio. Folk-rock combined traditional material with electric instruments and rock music rhythms (see Young [2010] for an extensive documentation of its history and inspirations). One of its key champions was Ashley Hutchings, whose work in three of the most commercially successful folk-rock bands (Fairport Convention, Steeleye Span, and The Albion Band) fused revival material circulating among more traditionally-minded participants in folk clubs, as well as material he had researched himself from archival collections, with a rock sound. Hutchings' fame and commercial success are crucial as it was through this route that the memory of the Straw Bear was reawakened. In 1976, Hutchings released the LP *Rattlebones and Ploughjack*, an audio documentary on British Morris dancing traditions. 'Although its significance could hardly be gauged at that time, the record... laid the foundations for the Whittlesey Straw Bear revival' (Frampton 1989: 19). Crucially, it included a reading of the testimony by G.C. Moore Smith (1909) as seen above, bringing it out from the pages of an obscure journal to a wider audience. This audience included Brian Kell, who had only very recently moved from the north-east of England to Whittlesey, and, owning a copy of *Rattlebones and Ploughjack* and having an interest in folk traditions, music, and dance borne out of the folk revival, petitioned the local historical society to revive the custom: 'Although a stranger to the area... I would like to revive the Straw Bear, and am looking for the sanction of the people of Whittlesey to do so' (Frampton 1989: 21).

This permission was granted, with the first revived dance of the Straw Bear in 1980. A crucial point to make here is that the revived form was based on written records of the practice; primarily Moore Smith, as encountered via Hutchings' LP. The existence of the practice had not been entirely forgotten in Whittlesey – its persistence in the town's cultural memory can be



shown by the fact that when in 1975 a pub opened as part of new housing development on the edge of the town, a competition was run to find a name for the pub and the winning name was ‘The Straw Bear’. Yet memory of its existence is not the same as memory of its form; and while some idea of the Bear as part of the town’s heritage persisted, it seems that the time having elapsed made it difficult to find living sources whose memories of the day could be called upon. When I met with Brian Kell, he explained that he had managed to find one old resident who remembered the bear from when he was a boy – but all he could recall clearly was that it terrified him. What we are discussing, then, is a revival based on published records of what the practice would have been like, with innovated elements (see the discussion of the culmination on Sunday below) added by the organisers. The style of the costume itself, while taking inspiration from historic photos of the straw bear, was again developed by the organisers themselves by trial and error, using locally sourced wheat straw. Today the straw used is from a nearby farm where new varieties of wheat are researched and tested, and this straw is affixed in bundles to a base costume of overalls, a jacket, and a frame of metal tubing.

As word of the revival spread, more folk revival dance teams came to Whittlesey for the weekend to join in, ‘following the bear’ and dancing around the town. In the years to come, a pattern emerged for the Straw Bear Festival, which is still recognisable at the time of writing. The festival takes place on the Saturday nearest to Plough Monday. The day begins at 10.30 in the morning with a procession into the centre of the town, led by the bear and his handler and musicians, followed by a group of young men with blacked-up faces reviving the practice of the ‘ploughgang’ by pulling an antique plough through the streets, and then followed by all of the dance teams who have come from across the country to take part in the festival. In 2017, 42 different teams followed the bear, representing not only Molly Dancing, but revived styles of Morris and other traditional dance from all parts of England. Over the course of the day, the bear then moves through the town, dancing in front of each pub to the tune which Ashley Hutchings had chosen to include in *Rattlestones and Ploughjack* as the music to follow on from G.C. Moore Smith’s description of the Straw Bear. Dance teams perform throughout the town – again, primarily outside the packed pubs, from which an audience, consisting of locals from Whittlesey and the surrounding villages and towns as well as folk revival enthusiasts from across the country, watch with plastic pint glasses in hand. The dancing ends around 3.30 in the afternoon, but revellers remain in the town’s pubs long into the night.

The following day, people gather at the local Community College, at first in the hall to watch a programme of dances by the different visiting dance teams. Though a bar is close at hand, in contrast to the Saturday conviviality of dancing in the streets while the revellers crowd around with drinks in

their hands, this Sunday performance for a seated audience has the more formal character of a concert or exhibition. However, this then leads into the finale of the weekend. The gathered audience troops outside. The straw bear (presumably no longer containing a dancer) waits in the grounds of the school. As the musicians surround the bear and begin to play his tune, the straw creature is set alight. The music becomes slower and more ponderous as the flames spread through the straw. Then, once the bear is consumed by the flames, the music ends, and the assembled crowd all shout ‘happy new year!’ Straw taken from the bear prior to burning is handed out to the assembled onlookers to take away for luck in the year ahead, and the crowd disperses.

It is a scene which Frazer would have surely found noteworthy: here, according to his logic, is the pretence of killing the corn spirit, only for it to be reborn anew each agricultural year, as the crops will surely grow again after the winter (Frazer 1912: 328). Yet it is an innovation of the revival, taking shape after the first few years of the festival as the organisers sought a more dramatic end point than simply sending the costume to the tip.

#### A hole in my stocking and a hole in my shoe: the revival at Ramsey

I will return to Whittlesey shortly. However, first I want to turn to the more recent, and rather different, reinstitution of the Straw Bear at Ramsey to further explore some of the characteristics we might associate with ‘revival’.

Compared to the better documented Whittlesey bear, there are only sparse records of the Ramsey Straw Bear. The best known account comes from Sybil Marshall’s *Fenland Chronicle* in which she records the childhood recollections of her mother, who lived in the fens north of Ramsey:

*A party of men would choose one of their gang to be ‘straw bear’ and they’d start a-dressing him in the morning ready for their travels round the fen at night. They saves some o’ the straightest, cleanest and shiniest oat straw and bound it all over the man until he seemed to be made of straw from head to foot... When night came they’d set out from pub to pub and house to house, leading the straw bear on a chain. When they were asked in, the bear would go down on his hands and knees and caper about and sing and so on. (Marshall 1967: 201)*

The Ramsey Straw Bear was revived in 2009 as part of ‘Cambridgeshire Roots’, a heritage project funded by money raised through the National Lottery. The goal of this project, led by Gordon Philips and Nicky Stockman of the Ouse Washes Molly dancing team, was to work with 14 primary schools across the county to introduce the children to the historic rural customs – primarily dance customs – documented in Cambridgeshire. In Ramsey, in-

spiration was taken from the account in *Fenland Chronicle* to recreate the Straw Bear on Plough Monday, and the schools have continued with the Straw Bear celebrations every year since.

As Livingston (1999: 73) notes, folk revivals often have a strong pedagogical component. A key characteristic of the first English folk revival, for example, was the promotion of a national folk culture through songbooks for schools, such as Cecil Sharp and Sabine Baring-Gould's *English Folk-Songs for Schools* (see Boyes 1993 for a discussion of this work and its significance). In this way, elements of informal social life become formalised and reconstituted as part of the formation of a national character within the educational curriculum. What is striking here is the shift in respectability as once-denigrated practices become 'traditional' and part of a repertoire of identity.<sup>5</sup> This is well illustrated within the pedagogical revival of the Ramsey Straw Bear.

To see children encouraged to take part in Plough Monday revelry as a school activity is, from an historical point of view, a remarkable reversal. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, children were discouraged from participating in Plough Monday. The entry from Swaffham Bulbeck school logbook for Plough Monday 1874 reveals the attitude of the head teacher: 'About 20 boys absent today to sing about the streets, thus keeping up an absurd custom which prevails in this locality.'<sup>6</sup> That which was once considered absurd by teachers and others in authority is now encouraged by their present-day equivalents, as a way of learning about local social history and developing civic identity.

The children follow the bear through the streets of Ramsey. Following the description in *Fenland Chronicle* of 'plough-witching' (Marshall 1967: 201-202), where children disguised themselves and passed through the streets singing and collecting money, the schoolchildren blacken their faces and wear flamboyant costumes. Processing through the town, they sing a Plough Monday song taught to the school by two women who recalled it from their childhood in Ramsey during the 1950s:

*A hole in my stocking and a hole in my shoe  
Please won't you give me a penny or two  
If you haven't got a penny then a ha'penny will do  
If you haven't got a ha'penny then God bless you<sup>7</sup>*

Given that Straw Bear customs were considered a form of anti-social behaviour by the police precisely because they were a form of 'cadging' (Moore

5 See also Cornish (2016) on the role of folk festivities in Padstow, Cornwall, as markers of history, identity, and belonging.

6 This and other logbook entries for Plough Monday from Cambridgeshire schools have been made available by Cambridgeshire Roots organisers Nicky Stockman and Gordon Philips on their website at <http://ploughmonday.co.uk/>

7 These words are also recalled by Sybil Marshall's mother in *Fenland Chronicle* (1967: 202).

Smith 1909: 202), the fact that words which once would have been associated with begging are now taught to children for them to sing with impunity as they pass through the streets is a powerful demonstration of how the practice has shifted in respectability. (Money is indeed collected by the plough-witches, though for charity rather than for the children to spend themselves.) Far from being a disreputable practice, the Plough Monday customs are re-awoken as a wholesome activity and a fun way of bringing history to life.

The bear and the plough-witches make their way to the green of the ruined Ramsey Abbey. Here, they gather around a plough, which is blessed by the Rector of the Parish Church: 'God speed the plough: the plough and the ploughman, the farm and the farmer, machine, and beast, and man.' This prayer is part of the Anglican service for Plough Sunday (that is, the Sunday after the Epiphany), which is celebrated in some churches within the fens and other rural communities in England. In some ways, Plough Sunday itself, with its focus on the church rather than the streets, and formal prayers rather than dancing, might be seen as an institutionalisation of the spirit of Plough Monday; yet what is significant here is that in this revived custom, church ceremony is not in opposition to revelry, but rather incorporates it. And so the blessing is followed by Molly Dancing performed by the children.

The plough which is blessed is sometimes an antique plough, brought from the collection of the Ramsey Rural Museum; other times, modern tractor-drawn ploughs have been blessed. This variation reveals something about the relationship between modern revived Plough Monday practices and the working landscape of the fens. A plough sourced from the museum would appear to root the celebrations in the region's history; yet to what extent is there continuity with this history? Although English rural landscapes continue to be characterised by the preponderance of farmland, the number employed in the agricultural sector has declined dramatically in the last half century (Zayad 2016). In the East Anglian fens, agriculture accounts for only 1.8% of the workforce (above the national average of 1.5%), compared to around 25% in 1950. As Livingston (1999: 75) remarks, the 'folk' in folk revivals often seem to be people living in a land and time far removed from society; and from one perspective, even here in an apparently rural setting, the revival seems to focus on a rurality which is distant in imagination rather than close at hand. Like the plough, one might conclude it is a museum piece. Yet this would be to ignore the significance of the working landscape in the geographies of those who dwell in the fens. Here, after all, is a landscape dominated by agriculture, transformed in the service of arable farming (Irvine 2017): agricultural land accounts for 86% of the land use, and the very shape of the terrain, with its wide open character cut across with ditches and traversed by long straight raised roads, is defined by the work of drainage to produce fertile land for crops.

The blessing of a modern working plough, then, signifies this ongoing importance of the arable landscape. What we see is an invention of tradition which serves to celebrate a rural fenland culture and identity rooted in a relationship with the agricultural land at a time of disconnection from agricultural labour.

### Order and disorder

Boyes (1993) describes the public and somewhat acrimonious difference of opinion between two pioneers of the first English folk revival: Mary Neal, founder of the Guild of Morris Dancers in 1904, and Cecil Sharp, founder of the English Folk Dance society in 1911. I would argue that these differences reveal ‘ideal types’ within folk revivalists’ motivations that help us to understand tensions between formality and informality within revived practices such as the Straw Bear. While both sought the preservation and dissemination of traditional forms of music and dance among the general population, they differed markedly on how this should be approached. Not only did Sharp favour a strict pedagogy of traditional styles, with formal examinations, he also felt that the dances were deserving of dignity, even solemnity, and should be performed with gravitas. Folk culture was not to be the frivolous counterpoint to high culture, but was just as deserving of seriousness. For Neal, the focus was more on recapturing the joyful revelry and exuberance of the occasions on which the dances had been originally performed.

In considering the restoration of the Straw Bear as a later revival, to what extent does it confirm to one or another of these competing points of view, considered as ideal types? At first appearances, one might well say that it is Neal’s approach that has been triumphant. In Ramsey, while the children clearly practice their dances and work hard to make the day a success, the focus is very much on the fun of the occasion. In Whittlesey, the emergence of the revived Straw Bear from the folk-rock movement and the eclectic nature of the occasion make plain that this is not a formal and dignified re-enactment, but an attempt to rekindle the spirit of midwinter celebration. In the words of one Molly Dancer from a local team, relaxing between dances in full costume in the warmth of St Mary’s church, Whittlesey (where hot soup is served throughout the Saturday of the Straw Bear festival), ‘We’re all here to have a bit of fun, nobody’s here to take themselves seriously, come on, don’t tell me anyone would dress themselves up like this if they wanted to be taken seriously!’ Nevertheless, the two rival visions presented in Boyes’ account of the history of revival point to an important duality, also evident in the contrast between the street dancing and the school hall ‘exhibition’ of dancing: Straw Bear is simultaneously a formally organised occasion with clear pedagogical goals and an attempt to revive the informal exuberance glimpsed in historic records of Plough Monday.



The organiser Brian Kell, in conversation with me, specifically noted that upon his arrival in the East Anglian fens he was surprised to find it a 'desert' of folk song; indeed, at the time of the revival a lot of people didn't even know what a Morris dancer was. With this in mind, he considered the festival to be a process of 're-education'. Yet at the same time he was clear that, in no uncertain terms, the festival was 'a load of nonsense'.

These different elements – education and nonsense – point to a complex relationship here between the source of the festival in misrule and its modern-day institutionalised nature. One participant in the festival – a Cambridgeshire resident not associated with any of the dance teams, but who likes to play in the informal music sessions that take place in the pubs on the Saturday – suggested there was always going to be an inevitable tension between the formally organised events 'which need to be run like a machine otherwise you have the council come down on them like a tonne of bricks' and the informal events that happen 'around the fringes' like the tune and singing sessions he enjoyed. He pointed to a particular instance of this tension in recent years, when the Yorkshire dance group 'Mr Fox' who specialise in evening fire dancing and the use of pyrotechnics were told in no uncertain terms that their 'raids' – impromptu dances at the time of the festival which gain their impact from the element of surprise – were not welcome at the Straw Bear. The musician explained,

*What Mr Fox do isn't exactly my sort of thing, I'm a traddy<sup>8</sup> as you can see, and I absolutely get where [the Straw Bear] organisers are coming from, they need to work with the licensing authorities, the council, whatever, all the health and safety of the weekend that's their responsibility, otherwise no more Straw Bear. But at the same time, it did strike me a bit ironic that here's a festival that's meant to be all about misrule and yet anything that looks like a bit of disorder gets pounced upon.*

The more the event becomes 'stage-managed' the greater the risk people become 'rigid' about it, 'and then it's not Straw Bear anymore is it?'

This resonates with Victor Turner's classic approach to the relationship between liminality and institutionalisation. In *The Ritual Process* – a book written at a time when counter-cultural movements had been growing in prominence in Europe and America – Turner (1969) offers an account of the anti-structural potential of 'Liminal entities' which 'are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (1969: 95). The liminal characteristics of Plough Monday celebrations are apparent: disguise (including face-blackening, gender-switching, and, of course, the Straw Bear costume) and the

8 A folk musician favouring the preservation traditional tunes, songs, and instruments over modern materials and innovations.



freedom which the disguise makes possible, disrupts the routine and the everyday. That such celebrations were held in suspicion by authorities is testament to their being beyond the pale of accepted law and formal ceremonial. As Bradtke (1999: 21) notes, the workers involved in Plough Monday activities were frequently disparaged as ‘truculent rustics’. Turner’s argument is that such a position outside of the accepted social order is full of generative potential: here is a space of celebration not broken down by the dividing lines of the routine world, but which opens up a sense of human potential which transcends structure and emphasises fundamental characteristics. Standing outside the social order, we become ‘a member of the whole community of persons’ (Turner 1969: 105).

Given that revivals themselves are often counter-cultural movements (Livingston 1999), presenting a ‘traditional’ way of life as critique of a society which has apparently lost such traditions and the values they represent, the liminal character of Plough Monday and such festivals of misrule sit well with revival’s oppositional stance. Yet as Turner rightly points out, disruptions of the everyday become routinised and institutionalised. The spontaneous impulse is brought within the social order where ‘time and history... bring structure into their social life and legalism into their cultural output’ (Turner 1969: 153-154).

This dynamic of liminality and routinisation is evident in the celebration of the Straw Bear festival. Indeed, at Whittlesey, it is possible to speak of two parallel, entwined festivities. What we have described above shows the well-organised, planned nature of the folk revival celebrations bringing musicians and dancers from across the country into the town. Yet it is not only folk revivalists who follow the bear. In the wake of the pageantry, thousands descend upon the town, the pubs and clubs are jammed with customers, and for young people of the region, in particular, it is a festival which breaks the monotony of winter. (In the words of one young woman trying to obtain some money for the day from her mother, ‘Come on, you wouldn’t want your daughter to be sober for Straw Bear, would you?’) Of course, one should not be too quick to divide those who follow the bear into two separate constituencies. The relationship between those actively involved in the folk music and dance and those who come to take part primarily by drinking is generally playful and there is no rigid distinction between participants. The movements of the bear and the dancers, after all, give focus to the weekend, lifting it out of the ordinary. The unique character of the festival is a source of pride to many of the locally based revellers, and some act in ways that draw on and take for themselves the practices of the folk revivalists; for example; wearing ‘lucky straw’ from the bear, bringing pewter tankards to drink rather than plastic pint glasses, or ambushing friends to smear shoe-polish over their faces, jokingly blacking them up in the manner of the Molly Dancers.

By Saturday evening, the revelry occasioned by the bear has no further need for folk revival activities as the partying driven by the local youth gains an energy of its own. While this might be treated as evidence of what Victor Turner (in an article on the Rio Carnival) sees as the potential of the liminal space for 'Dionysiac abandonment' (Turner 1983: 122) – a playful mood in which 'repression must be lifted' (1983: 123) – in the context of the routinisation of the Straw Bear and the need for the approval of the authorities for its continued existence, it is not surprising that some folk revivalists criticise the late night revellers for 'taking it too far' by binge drinking, pointing to the state of the streets the next morning. In the telling words of one visiting member of a dance team, 'as far as I'm concerned the Straw Bear goes on until the late afternoon, and then the evening is something else, a bit of a no-go zone really', suggesting that things often turn 'a bit feral'. Seen this way, there is an inevitable tension between the license of the midwinter festivity and licensing law: as a festival organiser explained, 'in the words of the licensing officer, the Straw Bear Festival is the catalyst of all things that happen over the week end whether we like it or not', and for this reason people who do not know how to behave risk 'spoiling it for everyone'. History shows that the authorities have had to put a stop to the Straw Bear before, after all.

### Contestation and controversy

It would be misleading, then, to follow Turner too simplistically in suggesting that the anti-structural potential of liminality to generate commonness of feeling leads to the dissolution of social difference. Just as Eade and Sallnow (1991) critiqued the Turners' emphasis on the anti-structural character of pilgrimage (Turner and Turner 1978) – noting that in fact an ethnographic perspective on pilgrimage reveals contestation between pilgrims and religious authorities, differentiation between different groups of pilgrims, and competition between pilgrims themselves – so too should we note that an analysis of apparently 'liminal' midwinter festivity reveals contestation. We have seen above that folk revivalists and the mass of evening revellers drawn largely from the local population can have a somewhat different idea about what constitutes an 'appropriate' celebration of the Straw Bear. There is a shared core symbol – all are following the bear – but as Cohen (1993) has noted in the context of his analysis of the Notting Hill carnival and other festivals, the ambiguity of symbols of celebration means that they are not subject to fixed meaning defined by a single group. Rather, they are in a dynamic state of flux, taken up, modified, mobilised, and critiqued by various individuals and groups.

Abner Cohen's perspective here is invaluable in showing us how the contestation surrounding potent symbols is an important site for the shaping and reshaping of political identity; a two dimensional movement, involving

a continual interplay between cultural forms and political relations (Cohen 1974). This is well illustrated by the contestation which surrounds another core symbol of Plough Monday: the practice of ‘blacking up’.

The significance of blacking up is linked to the wider idea of the day being, in the words of the organiser Brian Kell, ‘out of the normal’. He noted that when he had been the one wearing the bear costume in the early years he had, in fact, blacked up his face (even though behind the straw this would not have been particularly visible) because he ‘wanted to be different on the day’. As he remarked, this desire to do something ‘out of the normal’ manifests itself in different ways in many of the groups of people, unconnected with the dance teams or the organisers, who come to follow the bear in ‘marvellous’ costumes – one such group comes each year dressed as cartoon characters; another as kings and queens.

Historical explanations of the role of blacking up in Molly Dancing, Plough-Witching and other Plough Monday festivities, focus on its function as a disguise (see for example, Marshall [1967: 201]: ‘We dressed up in anything we could find and blacked our faces with soot from the chimney to disguise ourselves’). Bradtke (1999: 13) offers the following explanation:

*[...] a simple, easily obtained disguise, blacking up was useful to anyone bent on public mischief. When used in association with Molly dancing, black-face allowed the dancers some level of anonymity and freedom to participate in activities on the fringes of social acceptability.*

Yet from a contemporary perspective, such explanations can sit uncomfortably with wider presumptions that blacking up is inevitably a racialised practice, adjacent to the theatrical ‘blackface’ of minstrel shows from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, in which white performers wore makeup in derogatory imitation of black African-Americans. Cornish (2016) describes clearly the tensions surrounding blacking up at the Padstow midwinter Mummerys Day (or ‘Darkie Day’ as it was formerly known). Keegan-Phipps (2017) describes the furious response in 2014 to David Cameron, UK Prime Minister at the time, being photographed with a group of Morris Dancers at Banbury Folk Festival who were wearing black face paint. The bulk of this reportage directly associated such blacking up with racist minstrelsy blackface, and expressed an ‘underlying disbelief that such a thing could still be happening in an enlightened modern society’ (Keegan-Phipps 2017: 3).

The Straw Bear festivities at Whittlesey in 2017 took place against the backdrop of this ongoing controversy. A number of incidents in the previous year had directly affected other events and the dancers in attendance. In August 2016 Shrewsbury Folk Festival had announced that from the following year, they would no longer book dance teams who blacked their faces, following the threat of legal action by the local equality group ‘Fairness and Racial

Equality in Shropshire'. Then, days before the Straw Bear, a group of Morris Dancers in Birmingham City Centre abandoned their performance after being heckled by onlookers for their use of black face paint.

These events prompted some indignant responses, including in the local fenland press. On the week of the festival the *Wisbech Standard* published an article with the headline 'Fenland residents say it's ludicrous 'blacked-up' Morris Dancers in Birmingham received abuse for being racist'.<sup>9</sup> Reporting on concerns that the events would affect the Straw Bear celebrations, the article states that 'Fenland residents hit out at shoppers who called Plough Day dancers in Birmingham racist for blacking up their faces', quoting the opinions of locals who thought the accusation 'bloody stupid': 'This is ludicrous! What kind of ignorance do people hold to have to constantly wave this racism flag?', before concluding with an official statement from the Straw Bear festival organisers, stating that:

*The Festival operates an equal opportunity policy with no prejudices against Colour, Creed or Gender. When inviting performers to their programmed events their policy is to provide the general public a broad spectrum of art forms based on British Heritage. They do not interfere with the diverse art forms these invited groups represent, in particular, their costume. The Festival has in the past and will in the future, resist any external organisation, individual or body who attempts to impose their will or ideology on the festival's invitation policy.*

Blacking up is far from being a universal practice among Molly Dancers at the festival. While some sides approximate a smearing of soot over the face in the manner described in historical documentation of the Plough Monday dancers, a number of dance teams approach the question of disguise with different styles of face paint. While some explain their decision to use other facepaint styles as a means of avoiding unintentionally causing offence due to connotations of 'blackface', among several teams the decision has been made primarily to create a unique signature look: the members of Gog Magog Molly, for example, paint their faces all manner of bright colours, while Pig Dyke Molly adopt striking black and white designs in apparent imitation of the rock band Kiss. At Whittlesey in 2017, the decisions made by the various teams and followers to black up, or not, were unchanged from previous years. Yet this backdrop of controversy inevitably had an impact on the festival. In conversation in the pubs, several of the participants expressed relief that there had been no scenes like those of the previous week in Birmingham. For

9 *Wisbech Standard* 10 January 2017 <http://www.wisbechstandard.co.uk/news/fenland-residents-say-it-s-ludicrous-blacked-up-morris-dancers-in-birmingham-received-abuse-for-being-racist-on-eve-of-the-straw-bear-festival-in-whittlesey-1-4843484>

some, there was clear concern about the risk of causing offence. Others, however, saw the continuation of the custom of blacking up as a form of defiance in the face of the denigration of English culture: in the words of one resident who told me he attends the Straw Bear festivities every year ‘our culture is being sacrificed because people are looking for ways to take offence, while other cultures make no compromise whatsoever’, linking this to wider concerns about ‘double standards’ and the rise of ‘political correctness’.

Whatever the question of the ‘original meaning’ of blacking up – and as we have seen above, the question of original meaning of practices is a difficult one – we see here how the ambiguity of symbols, as noted by Abner Cohen, becomes a site of contestation. Keegan-Phipps (2017) notes the convergence of several contexts which cause the relationship between cultural forms and political relations to be in a particularly acute state of flux. In particular, we see the context of the rising significance of questions of ‘English’ identity in the wake of the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, as well as the 2016 vote for Britain to leave the European Union. In this context, controversy surrounding the symbolism of Plough Monday becomes a site for the expression of dissonance about cultural and ethnic relations in the UK – both from the perspective of critiquing the overwhelming whiteness of participation in the English folk revival (see Keegan-Phipps 2017: 14), as well as a perspective critical of the way in which the concerns of a perceived liberal urban elite are apparently forced onto a reluctant population away from the metropolitan centre. Once again, misrule and the way in which such misrule is interpreted becomes a site of potent significance for the question of rural identity.

### Taming the bear?

In the revival of the customs, we see a striking social inversion; that which was previously considered a form of social disorder and begging becomes an honoured tradition and a respectable expression of the history of the region. The absurd re-emerges as heritage. This cementing of celebrations originally associated with the agricultural year into the identity of the contemporary fenland community is particularly striking as we consider the context of this revival in the face of a radical decline in the percentage of the population directly engaged in agriculture.

So what significance can Plough Monday, as a calendrical festival rooted in agricultural labour, have for the contemporary East Anglian fens? The very scale of the social and economic changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that led to the apparent falling away of Plough Monday practices may, at the same time, help us to explain the urgent need to find means of asserting continuity in the face of such rupture: the rediscovery of rural customs as a performative grounding for identity.



However, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that an emphasis on continuity may draw us away from the very characteristics that lend the festivities their potency. It is not my intention, then, to follow Frazer in claiming Plough Monday and the Straw Bear as ‘survivals’. Rather, they serve as temporal disturbance; marking time as a disruption of the routine and the everyday, and injecting the calendar with an occasion for contestation amidst the cold dark winter days.

Can the Straw Bear ever be tamed? It is certainly true that he is managed by committee. As Victor Turner has argued, that which was liminal becomes routinized; yet it retains its potential for anti-structure. As the afternoon proceeds, the pubs become louder, the folk music becomes impossible to hear, and the Plough Monday festivities become again a space of license and joyful misrule – the very characteristics that led to officials shutting them down in the early 20th century. Official pageantry gives way to the unofficial anti-social sociality.

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